

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Jean-Baptiste GREUZE (Tournus 1725 - Paris 1805)

The First Harvest of the Wheat

Black chalk, brush and black and grey ink and grey wash on laid paper.

476 x 593 mm. (18 3/4 x 23 3/8 in.)

This very large and previously unknown drawing is an important addition to Jean-Baptiste Greuze's late oeuvre, and is one of the last complete compositional drawings that he produced. It also appears to be the only extant record of one of the artist's most significant works as a history painter. The composition of this drawing serves as a pendant to Greuze's painting of *A Farmer Handing Over the Plow to his Son in the Presence of his Family*, also known as *The First Furrow*, exhibited at the Salon of 1801 and today in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. As has been noted of the Pushkin painting, 'We see here power being passed from father to son, the latter becoming the head of the family in his turn once he has received the tool which will allow him to earn a living for them all. The moral theme emphasises the importance of the world of peasant farming and of working the land.'

The present sheet, which does not seem to have been translated into a finished painting, seems to be a pendant to *The First Furrow*. It depicts the family of the farmer showing its gratitude for the son's hard work, while at the right background young women serve bread baked from the wheat he has harvested. Although no related canvas is known to have been painted, the size and finish of this drawing suggest that the artist had fully developed the composition. Another, earlier preparatory study for the Pushkin painting is today in the Musée Greuze in Tournus.

A similarly large compositional drawing by Greuze for *The First Furrow*, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, is considerably less finished than the present sheet.

Among stylistically comparable works by Greuze is a finished drawing of *A Couple in a Park* (also known as *The Departure for the Hunt*), executed in grey ink and wash and exhibited at the Salon of 1800; the drawing, formerly in the collection of Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, is today in the Louvre.

Artist description:

After a period of study in Lyon, Jean-Baptiste Greuze arrived in Paris around 1750 and entered the studio of Charles-Joseph Natoire. He was admitted into the Académie Royale as an associate member in 1755, in the category of peintre de genre particulier, but did not gain full membership as an Academician until 1769. His paintings of moralizing genre subjects, exhibited at the annual Salons, earned him the praise of the influential critic Denis Diderot. Among his most celebrated works in this field of 'moral painting', as it was defined by Diderot, was *The Marriage Contract* of 1761, now in the Louvre. He was also a superb portraitist, exhibiting a number of portraits at the Salon throughout the 1760s to considerable acclaim.

Immensely famous and successful at the height of his career, Greuze enjoyed the patronage of such prominent collectors as Jean de Jullienne, Ange-Laurent de Lalive de Jully, the Duc de Choiseul, the Marquis de Marigny and the Empress Catherine II of Russia, although his difficult temperament often alienated other clients. Even the artist's first great champion Diderot, writing to the sculptor Etienne-Maurice Falconet in 1767, described Greuze as 'an excellent artist, but a very disagreeable character. One should have his drawings and his paintings, and leave the man at that.'¹ In 1769, angered by the rejection of his reception piece - a history painting depicting *Septimus Severus Reproaching His Son Caracalla* - by the Académie Royale, who instead admitted him only as a genre painter, Greuze refused to exhibit at the Salon again for over thirty years, until 1800. Instead he exhibited and sold his paintings from his studio, with much success. However, his reputation suffered with the rise of Neoclassicism after the Revolution, although he received a royal pension from Louis XVI in 1792. Greuze died in relative obscurity at the age of eighty, in his studio at the Louvre.

A gifted, versatile and prolific draughtsman, Greuze was praised as such by Diderot, who noted, in a review of the Salon of 1763, that 'this man draws like an angel.' He was equally adept in chalks, pastel and ink, and often exhibited finished drawings alongside his paintings at the Salons. The 18th century collector, dealer and connoisseur Pierre-Jean Mariette commented that Greuze's drawings were much in demand, and that collectors habitually paid high prices for them.